R E P O R T R E S U M E S

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REMARKS ON THE MAX WOLFF REPORT.

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STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE WOLFE REPORT (SIX MONTHS LATER. STUDY I. PS 000 281) ARE NOTED. WEAKNESSES ARE JUDGED TO BE THAT WOLFF DID NOT CONTROL VARIATIONS IN TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS, CURRICULUM, OR STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS. STRENGTHS ARE (1) PARENT INTERVIEWS, (2) ASSESSMENT OF HEAD START-KINDERGARTEN TRANSITION, (3) RECOGNITION OF THREE FACTORS AS INTERRELATED (A) PERCENTAGE OF HEAD START CHILDREN IN CLASS, (B) THE KINDERGARTEN TEACHER'S KNOWLEDGE OF HEAD START ATTENDANCE AND (C) TEACHER ATTITUDES TOWARD VARIOUS LEARNING STYLES, AND (4) THE POSITION THAT GAINS CAN EVEN OUT IF PRIMARY SCHOOL EXPERIENCE FAILS TO DEVELOP THEM. (SEE ALSO PS 000 281.) (LG)

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REMARKS ON THE MAX WOLFF REPORT

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Remarks on the Max Wolff Report

by

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The essence of the Wolff report concerning the educational and intellectual impact of Head Start programs on a sample of children in New York City does not differ from the findings of other reports on this subject. In many ways this report is similar to that of Hess in that it deals with the evaluation of a segment of a large Board of Education sponsored program. Hess also found that the effect of Head Start evened out after several months. In both of these studies pupils' test scores were analyzed but variations in program characteristics were not controlled. Both investigators treated large scale public school sponsored programs as if they were homogeneous in nature and impact.

There are at least three points to be considered in the study of Head Start effects: (a) teacher variables (b) curriculum variables (c) pupil variables. (a) When data on pupils from a number of Head Start programs are assessed together in a common pool, it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of individual teachers or specific programs. However, if this is not done, one is forced to permit the impact of effective teachers or good aspects of specific programs to be balanced by the influence of weak aspects of program. The result may be to hide or distort the differential impacts of each. We know that Head Start programs and teachers vary and that they have differing affects. Beller, for example, carried out an assessment of 6-week Head Start-type programs in Pennsylvania. He compared three such programs, one of which had poor facilities and inadequately prepared teachers with two others which were superior in these respects. He found that the first program produced no lasting effects. However, significant differences were found between treated and control groups when studied in the programs characterized by more adequate teachers and better facilities. In general, the assessment of pre-school enrichment programs of longer duration, 9 months to 2 years, have yielded similar and complex patterns of success and failure when the ingredients of the program have not been looked at specifically and adequate and inadequate programs or program aspects have been pooled together.

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(b) The Wolff report addresses itself to the evaluation of some of the Board of Education sponsored Head Start programs in New York City. The particular programs studied were not selected because of any special program characteristics. These programs were not characterized by a systematic or novel curriculum. It is likely that the university-based Head Start programs such as University of Kansas, Johns Hopkins, and others were more successful in producing changes in the pre-school children because of a more systematic or imaginative curriculum. Unfortunately, Wolff's study, being a retrospective study, cannot yield any information in this respect since it did not study the curriculum and programs to which the children studied were exposed. This is the very area in which the Wolff study presents us with a challenge but relatively little information. Because the content of the Head Start programs themselves were not evaluated or studied in detail, we do not know how good or bad their curriculums were. We do not know whether the atmosphere was permissive or structured, or language oriented or social experience oriented, or if motor-cognitive development was emphasized or affective development was emphasized. The problem of Head Start curriculum goes beyond Wolff's evaluation study. We all know that, as yet, we have no definitely nor universally proven effective intervention methods for pre-school children. What we have are some methods which have been demonstrated to be effective with some children under some circumstances. This fact suggests that curriculum variables and pupil variables are crucial considerations in any effort at assessing the impact of such a program of intervention. The Wolff study does not claim to approach this level of refinement in its design.

(c) The children studied by Dr. Wolff's group have many characteristics which may be regarded as generally common to the group served by Head Start and to the control population to which they should be compared. However, when Wolff's groups are more carefully analyzed it is clear that they are not perfectly matched with respect to all characteristics. For example, the

Head Start children tended to come from families with lower incomes and less education. We are presented with no data relative to the nature of post Head Start school experience or relative to patterns of social and intellectual function in either group prior to Head Start in public schools. Consequently, judgments regarding the relationship of Head Start experience to achievement six months later are speculative. Similarly speculative are conclusions relative to differences in achievement levels. The latter are particularly questionable since the analyses provided do not treat questions of the statistical significance of alleged differences.

The Wolff study is a relatively simple follow-up of several children served by one grantee funded by Project Head Start. The pupil sample is very narrowly drawn when considered in the light of the variety of youngsters served by Head Start, and was generated without concern for representativeness with respect to these pupils variables. Teacher and curriculum variables have not been controlled. Nonetheless, there are merits in the study. The misinterpretations which have been presented in the press derive from the fact that the above limitations in the study were not taken into consideration. Among the ignored but important strengths of the study are:

(1) Though a number of studies have looked at the effects of Head Start upon the children who participated in these programs, few worked with parents. Wolff and his associates were particularly effective in carrying out intensive parent interviews. Focusing upon Puerto Rican as well as Negro parents (the availability of a Spanish-speaking Puerto Rican staff contributed to useful data being gathered) was one of the particularly useful features of this study. His findings of widespread parent enthusiasm are encouraging; they lend further support to many informal observations made by on the spot observers.

(2) Head Start Kindergarten Transition: Insufficient attention has been given to the interaction effect of Head Start children upon the climate of the kindergarten and the readiness of that instructional unit to build upon the gains achieved in the pre-school experience. Wolff suggests that this transition period is an important one in which what happens to the Head Start alumni is greatly influenced by the pupil mix into which they are placed and the conditions for continued learning which are provided.

(3) A major contribution of the study lies in its pointing to the need to study the following three factors as interrelated processes: a) the percentage of Head Start children in a classroom, b) the amount of familiarity and/or experience with Head Start the kindergarten teacher has, and c) the kindergarten teacher's attitudes toward and competence to work with children with different learning styles.

(4) Despite the technical problems in this study, Wolff's logic if not his data, supports the position that although there are many possible products of Head Start participation, few are as yet definitively measured. More importantly, in whatever form such gains appear, they can be dissipated in the absence of continued development and nurturance in the primary school experience.